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ABSTRACT

A professor finds the use of stories and storytelling, whether first-hand stories or second-hand stories, whether oral stories or stories provided through media or mediated channels, to be invaluable instructional tools in his communication classes. They personalize his classes, encourage a sense of camaraderie among class members, help illustrate key concepts and theories, and enliven class interactions. The professor uses a "human bingo" game, computer-mediated communication, and documentary and popular entertainment films to present relevant stories to the class. The stories help to build a personal bond that transcends the traditional class situation. The professor and the students all become part of a special narrative community. They become friends and confidants, as well as valued classmates. (RS)

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"The Power of Story to Personalize, Enrich, and Humanize Communication Education: My Own Story About Having Fun, Spinning Tales, and Illustrating Key Points in the Classroom"

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Telling Tales in Class

I didn't start out emphasizing the telling of stories in class. I didn't even develop this instructional strategy from a clearly articulated theoretical framework. It just developed over time. It started slowly, began to pick up steam, and now is probably the most important part of my pedagogical style. In this paper, I will share my experiences and some of the strategies I have developed to use stories to personalize, enrich, and humanize communication education.

The Early Days

In the early days when I first began teaching, I began my classes with personal introductions, where I would tell my classes about me and ask them to tell about themselves. These intros were fun and usually captured class attention, However, often our mutual introductions often would start sounding like prisoner-of-war statements: "Bob Smith, Sophomore, Communication, Hackensack - next person." To avoid this kind of phatic communication I began to probe for more information, encouraged students to divulge more personal information about themselves, asked them to tell us about some of the weird and "kinky" things about themselves that the class might find interesting. (I refer to this as "juicy information.")

This sharing of "juicy information" seemed to help enliven the class, but after finishing the intros, we generally reverted back to more traditional class protocol, with me providing lectures, they taking notes, with occasional anecdotes, handouts, guest lecturers, class discussions, and occasional media educational tools. I'm a pretty good lecturer, but the classes often became a bit stale and I wanted them to be exciting.

Eventually, as I became more comfortable in the classroom, I gave up my lecture notes and began to engage in more open discussions with the classes, often serving as a devil's advocate to provoke spirited interactions. This helped to enliven the classes, especially when the discussions involved personal disclosure. Over time, I began to realize that it was the story telling that was making the classes interesting. Students would pay close attention to the stories and if I was nimble, I could use these stories to illustrate communication theories. What great fun!

Current Practice

Now, I try to personalize all of the classes I teach by integrating stories and story-telling in these classes. Stories seem to capture my students' attention and imaginations. They make us all feel closer to one another, especially when the stories involve genuine self-disclosure of personal information. Generally, the more personal the story, the more interesting it is to the class, and the more it helps to encourage class discussion. (There is a point of diminishing return on this though. In one class when I asked students to talk about themselves in a personal manner, one of the students shared very personal information. He told us that he was struggling with his sexual identity, flirting with homosexuality. That, evidently, was too hot for the class to handle, because it was a discussion-stopper, rather than a discussion-starter. I guess the class had not developed the level of intimacy and trust yet to be able to handle that kind of personal disclosure.)

Sometimes I use fictionalized stories, presented orally in class or through some mediated channel. (I really like to use dramatic videotapes). Regularly, I tell personal stories of my own life, talk about my experiences with my family, the people I have

encountered, and my trials and tribulations on the job. The more I am able to share personal stories about my life with my students, the better they seem to be able to relate to me as a human being, and not just as a professor and authority figure.

I also try to evoke personal stories from my students in all of my classes. I find that when student share personal stories in class, they feel a sense of personal involvement and ownership of the class. Perhaps it is the risk of sharing private information that kindles this sense of ownership and involvement. Perhaps it is the fact that we all get to know personal information about each other in the class that helps us establish a unique, intimate, and trusting class climate. Regardless of the reasons, I have found that story-telling is a magical process in humanizing and enriching the classes I teach! No matter what the subject of the class (interpersonal, organizational, health, or even research methods) or the level of the class (introductory, upper division, or graduate seminar), stories have become my most central instructional tool.

Specific Instructional Strategies: Human Bingo

I use several different tactics to introduce and evoke story telling in my classes. At the beginning of every class I not only do mutual introductions, starting with a rather personal self introduction to the class and the plea for "juicy information" from them, but I also play a fun game, "Human Bingo," that helps to evoke interesting stories from class members. In Human Bingo, I ask every member of the class to privately write down on a piece of paper some personal information about themselves that they don't think anyone in the class knows about. They are asked not to write their names on the paper, so the items will not be tied to any particular person. Sometimes I tweak this part of the game by telling them to write down something about themselves that they are

particularly proud of, something they are embarrassed about, something particularly strange about themselves, or something especially kinky! In all cases, I encourage them to share something others in the class will find interesting and unique.

Once the students have written brief accounts, I carefully collect the papers, being sure that no-one gets to read what others have written. I shuffle the papers, so they are not in any recognizable order, and then read out the items one by one, numbering them, and having all the students in the class create a list of numbered self-disclosure items. Once the lists are completed, we prepare to do the interactive (and most fun) part of Human Bingo.

I explain the rules of the game to the class. The general goal of the exercise is for each student to connect as many of the self-disclosure items as they can with the class members that shared the specific items. To do that they are instructed to stand up, look around the room for a class member they think wrote one of the items on the list, and approach that person to initiate dyadic conversation.

Before asking whether the person shared a specific item on the list, they are instructed to initiate physical contact (usually shaking hands) and maintain that contact while talking. (This rule is often violated because it is too risky for many students to maintain physical contact. However, I usually play the game too. When I interact with class members, I always maintain physical contact with them, even though students often find this to be uncomfortable. I do this both to intensify the encounter and to encourage others to play by the rules.) After physical contact has been established between two class members, they are to introduce themselves to each other.

Once the introductions have been made, they can ask each other whether they contributed any one item. If a class member correctly guesses an item contributed, he or she gets that person to initial the contributed item on the list. (The more initials collected for correctly guessed items, the better class members do in this game.) Once a dyad has exchanged guesses about any item, they must go on to another class member and begin again the process of physical contact, introductions, and exchange of guesses. (Class members can go back to someone they spoke to earlier once they have spoken to another class member.) Usually I give the class about 20 minutes or so to interact in dyads with one another. By that time, most class members have encountered every other member of the class at least once.

This exercise invariably promotes a "Mardi Gras" party-like atmosphere in the classroom, with lots of smiles, laughter, and good comradeship. The entire class atmosphere invariably changes during the course of this exercise from being a customary college communication class to becoming a very loose and enjoyable social event for all involved. This metamorphosis has a lasting effect on the class over the course of the semester and beyond!

Sometimes students don't follow all of the rules of the game in their eagerness to "win." (I often see three or more people grouping together to exchange items, although I specify that the level of interaction should be the dyad. Sometimes class members overhear someone correctly guessing another person's item and, although it is forbidden to learn about contributed items this way, they line up to get that person's initials.) No matter whether the rules are followed or not, this exercise increases class members' interest and involvement with one another. It piques their interest in the

backgrounds of their colleagues, provides them with an opportunity to get to know each other, and the personal interaction (and touching!) creates a remarkable level of intimacy in the class that encourages future self-disclosure and story sharing within the class.

After the twenty minutes or so of interaction, I have everyone sit back down in their seats and we engage in a debriefing discussion of the exercise. Most class members can't wait to find out who contributed which items. I go through the list of self-disclosure items and have the person that contributed each item explain it, encouraging him or her to fill in the blanks by telling the class the whole story behind the item. There is great interest within the class in these stories, especially the particularly risqué (juicy) ones. The debriefing discussion that follows the exercise also allows me to talk about relevant communication theory (such as self disclosure, nonverbal communication, person perception, stereotyping, initmacy, relationship development, etc.) that explains class behavior during the exercise and gives everyone in the class the opportunity to tell the story behind the self-disclosure item they contributed.

The Use of Media

I also like to use media to present relevant stories to the class. I use both documentary films about interesting people and programs and popular entertainment films in classes. I try to match the film to the specific topics being covered in the particular class. For example, in a seminar I taught about Communication and HIV/AIDS I showed the film "And the Band Played On," based upon the book by the late noted AIDS activist Randy Shilts. This film is about Dr. Don Francis, a researcher at the Centers for Disease Control, and the process by which he uncovered the AIDS endemic

and prompted public response to this serious health threat. This film brought the public health struggle against AIDS to life and encouraged a strong sense of activism in this class. I also showed Mara Adelman's powerful ethnographic film, "The Pilgrim Must Embark," about life and death in the Bonaventure House for people with AIDS to illustrate the experiences of people confronting this disease and their need for community connection and social support. These films evoked strong personal and emotional responses from students and acted as great springboards for discussing course topics. It is the narrative aspects of these films that really bring course topics to life.

I often use popular films like "The Doctor" and "Whose Life is it Anyhow" in classes about health communication to illustrate the different complex and often challenging roles performed by health care providers and consumers in the modern health care system. These films help the class members to address in a very real way the many ethical issues, such as informed consent, autonomy, euthanasia, concerning health care practice. These media narratives help class members confront the difficult life and death decisions made in health care and recognize the very best and very worst communication practices that occur in this arena. These films often evoke stories from class members about their experiences with the health care system and increase the relevance of the class for them.

In a class I am teaching this semester about interpersonal communication I have used a number of different films to illustrate key issues. I used the wonderful romantic/comedic film "When Harry Met Sally" to illustrate cross-gender relations, relationship development, and the management of interpersonal conflict. I used Spike

Lee's powerful film "Do the Right Thing" to illustrate problems and failures in interracial communication and cultural sensitivity. I also showed the moving film "The Waterdance" about three young men in a rehabilitation center adjusting to accidents leading to paralysis, to illustrate the process of building and rebuilding relationships, redefinition of self-concept, and the expression of social support. These films are powerful educational tools for spurring conversations in class and applications of course materials. In fact, I ask students to write essay questions for our midterm and final exams based upon their interpretations of communication issues from these films.

Stories and Class Discussions

I rarely lecture for more than ten or fifteen minutes in any of my classes any more. Now, I rely much more on class discussions to present class information interactively. I usually begin by introducing a topic, providing some background information, and then posing some provocative questions about the topic, such as: "Can anyone think of an example of this issue from your own life?" or "How would you respond to a situation like this?" Once someone takes the bait by answering my question, the conversation takes off with others responding to that person and spurring still others to share their stories and personal perspectives.

I guess I have less control now over where the topic goes in these discussions than I had when I depended more on just lecturing to the class. However, now I give the class many more opportunities to share their stories and experiences relevant to class topics through our conversations. As a discussion facilitator, it is my task to try to keep the conversation on track, emphasize important points, and make sure everyone who wants to talk gets a chance to speak. I try to encourage input from all members of

the class and I encourage everyone to treat each other with respect and deference. I ask all my students to keep everyone's input to the class confidential, to try not to interrupt or talk over anyone else, and to be honest in the things they say in class. Occasionally I have to step in if a conversation gets too far afield, gets too hot to handle, or deteriorates into a gossip or gripe session, but this doesn't happen very often. Even the really hot and even hostile conversations are interesting and often most relevant to my classes.

Stories and Electronic Communication

In recent classes I have begun using computer mediated communication to encourage class interaction and story telling. I link everyone in the class up on a group list-serve that has each person's e-mail address. I encourage them in class to write to the list-serve about our class readings, discussions, and media. I pose specific thought-provoking questions at the end of each class about something we were talking about during class and invite students to write responses to these questions.

These e-mail notes take on a life of their own, with students responding to one another's comments, as well as to my comments to them. We are now communicating with each other every day, 24 hours a day, and not only in class. Class members can elaborate on class discussions, pose questions to one another, and collaborate on course assignments and projects.

Students who want to mull over complex issues brought up in class before proffering their opinions, now have that opportunity. Students who are quiet or could not get the floor in class, now have a forum for sharing their experiences and perspectives. I now have an opportunity to elaborate on issues raised in class and can

ask follow-up questions to class members. I also often use the list-serve as a way to preview and highlight upcoming class topics, assignments, and issues, as well as to share any concerns or requests I have with the class. The use of this channel has brought us all a lot closer together and helped us share more personal stories and ideas with each other.

When students write only to me about issues of relevance to the whole class, I often post their note and my response to them to the list-serve so everyone can see what they have to say and my response to them. (However, if the student sends me a private note that is not relevant to the whole class, I do not post the note or my response to the list-serve. If I am unsure whether a student wants his or her note to be made public, I ask permission before submitting their note and my response to the list-serve.)

Students often feel more comfortable providing informal information over electronic channels and there is a lot of playful teasing, kidding, and socializing that also occurs over electronic channels. This helps to further personalize and humanize the class, helping to build a climate of intimacy and friendship. The use of electronic communication has provided another rich channel for the sharing of stories and the exchange of relevant information.

Conclusion

I have found the use of stories and storytelling, whether first-hand stories or second hand stories, whether oral stories or stories provided through media or mediated channels, to be invaluable instructional tools in my classes. They personalize my classes, encourage a sense of camaraderie among class members, help illustrate key

concepts and theories, and enliven class interactions. The stories help to build a personal bond that transcends the traditional class situation. We all become part of a very special narrative community. We become friends and confidants, as well as valued classmates. I strongly encourage other instructors to develop ways to use stories to personalize, enrich, and humanize their classes!